## Mc CORMICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY COMMENCEMENT

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# DEPARTING HAPPINESS

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Scripture: Joshua 1:1-11

Moses is dead. After forty years of wandering in the wilderness, the people of Israel have arrived at a river. On the other side they can see, for the first time, their destination, the Promised Land. Joshua sends officers through the encampment: to the anxious people they announce:

> "Prepare your provisions, for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God gives you to possess." [Joshua 1:11]

You may not identify with much in the Bible. You may not ever have seen a burning bush, and the voice of God may never have spoken directly to you, and told you what to do next. And you may have concluded that whatever it is that the Bible is about, it is about things that happen to other people.

However ... there is not a one of us who cannot identify with those people gathered on the banks of the Jordan River, all their belongings, all their traditions, all their history behind them, peering through morning mist into the future, the Promised Land.

In fact, those people at that moment and place in their journey, remind me a lot of this moment and this place and this particular encampment.

How are they feeling that morning, forty years of nomadic wandering about to come to an end ... four decades of a routine they had long ago accommodated, about to confront a radically new future? My guess is that they are anxious, scared. They feel like going back, and if that is not possible, they are seriously considering going no further. They are talking about stopping right there, "on the verge of Jordan," as the old hymn puts it. Which is to say, they are feeling a lot like you may feel this morning, although it didn't take any of you forty years.

Who can't identify with them? In Stephen Ambrose's fine book, Undaunted Courage, a chronicle of the Lewis and Clark expedition, there is an account of Meriwether Lewis writing an eloquent and poignant entry in his journal on the night of April 7, 1805. He was in his buffalo skin teepee, in what is now central North Dakota, where the Knife River joins the Missouri. That day his tiny expedition headed into a wilderness no European American had ever seen before. A large keel boat, which had served to carry supplies, weapons, ammunition, food and a secure place from

attack, was turned around and sent back down the river to St. Louis. The little band would head for the Pacific Ocean alone.

Lewis wrote:

> "Our vessels consisted of six small canoes (and two larger row boats). This little fleet, altho' not quite so rispectable (sic) as those of Columbus, or Captain Cook, were still viewed by us with as much pleasure as those diservedly (sic) famed adventurers ever suffered theirs: and I dare say with as much anxiety for their safety and preservation. We were now about to penetrate a country at least two thousand miles in width, on which the foot of civilized men had never trodden: the good or evil it had in store for us was for experience to determine, and these little vessels contained every article by which we were to expect to subsist or defend ourselves."

And then Lewis became reflective, writing by candlelight in his teepee on the edge of the unknown:

> "The picture which now presented itself to me was a most pleasing one, entertaining as I do, the most confident hope of succeading (sic) in a voyage which had formed a darling project of mine for the last ten years. I could but esteem this moment of my departure as among the most happy of my life." [Stephen E. Ambrose, Undaunted Courage, New York, Simon and Schuster, NY, 1996, p. 212]

A departing happiness. Lewis should have been scared to death. It is hard to imagine a more fragile or vulnerable project. What impressed me about his journal entry is its expression of pleasure. Lewis was happy watching all visible means of support, all security, all contact with the world, sail down the river. It's almost as if he knew that it was the defining moment in his life: a convergence of huge dynamics – his particular gifts, and a specific situation, a need, a challenge which required his gifts. It's almost as if Lewis knew that his being there, leading the exploring party into the new Louisiana Purchase on behalf of Thomas Jefferson and the American government was why he had been born, the very purpose of his life. In our idiom, apropos this event, it's almost as if Lewis knew, in that moment of radical abandonment, radical trust, knew his calling, his vocation. "I could esteem this moment as among the most happy of my life."

My proposal this afternoon is that the life of faithfulness is a journey, a moving from place to place literally sometimes, but also intellectually, spiritually, that this experience – so very common in life itself – becomes religious, becomes an experience of God's presence, God's leading, God's grace for us, far more frequently than burning bushes, or voices out of the blue giving us specific instructions. That has been my experience.

It is one of the most consistent motifs in the tradition of Judeo-Christian religion – the Biblical tradition.

The story is about people moving from security to freedom, from certainty to riskiness, from predictability to happiness, from safety to salvation. That's the story from the beginning.

Think of it, the prototypes, Adam and Eve, mother and father of us all, get kicked out of the garden, where everything is safe and secure and predictable. Human history starts when their security ends. Now traditionally that story is evidence of God's displeasure at their disobedience, but the best of our theologians have always suspected that there isn't room in the Garden of Eden for human history: that human beings have to take charge, start making decisions – including some very bad ones; have to be thrown out of paradise before they can be whole and happy and saved. God, the old story reminds us, not only throws them out, God knits them garments for life outside paradise.

And then, in what biblical scholarship knows is the primal Bible story, Abraham and Sarah, elderly, settled, stable, hear a voice which, in the story is a lot more clear than I'll bet it was for them, that says something preposterous: "Go from your country and your kindred, and your parents' house to the land I will show you."

Can you imagine the day they tried to explain that to the neighbors? Abraham is 75. He and Sarah have no children. They have lived in one place for 50 years. They are comfortable: up at 7:00 for coffee and the newspaper at 7:30; walk the dog at 8:00; lunch, nap, cocktails, dinner, TV till bedtime, the buffet at the club on Thursday. Can you imagine the day Sarah and Abraham tell their neighbors they are selling their place, having a garage sale, cashing in their CDs and leaving?

"Where are you going, Abraham? To a retirement village?"

"Well, actually not. Actually, we don't know where we're going. We're headed for the promised land, but we really don't know where it is. So we're trusting God to show us and to provide for us. And we hate to bring it up, but we're expecting that sometime soon, Sarah's going to be pregnant. So we'll be parents, not just of a child, but an entire nation. That's a whole other story! Anyway, we're out of here."

Think about what that primal story is saying about human life and about God and about what we really need for the journey.

Think about the assertion – the breathtaking assertion – that the creator God, the one who calls being out of nothingness, form out of chaos, penetrates history and human enterprise and calls people to get up and move, the assertion that God's reality is accessible not merely in history – tradition – custom – but the future, that God's reality is not pushing us from behind, but out ahead, pulling us into the future. Think about that incredible theological assertion that God is making new and unlikely things happen: that God expects people not to be too settled, to be mobile enough to respond. This is, the story will tell us, a peculiar God who prefers tents to buildings; a God who is suspicious of temples and religion because temple religion has a way of becoming so tied up in its traditions, it forgets about God, a God who likes to be on the way – in the wilderness with the people; a God who promises to provide love and courage sufficient enough for the journey.

It emerges again, the Exodus, and in the Exile when God calls the people to break out of the oppressive routine of Babylonian captivity.

> "Do not remember the former things," God says through the voice of the prophet. "Do not consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing. Do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the desert ..."

The strong implication being that the new thing, the way in the desert, is actually a highway, upon which God's people are to walk, to move.

And of course, there is the chapter of the story to which we have our closest affinity, which begins when a man walks by a group of fishermen mending their nets and says, "Come, follow me."

It often seems that moving, traveling, getting up and going somewhere new is what faithfulness means in the Bible. And it is always an experience of exhilaration and energy ultimately, but first it is an experience of anxiety and fear and reluctance.

In fact, sometimes it seems that the opposite of faith in the Bible is not sin or unbelief, but the refusal to move.

I now wish to bring to this discussion one of my favorite commentators on the human condition, the late Dr. Seuss. One of the disadvantages of not having little children in your life is that you no longer have a socially acceptable reason for reading The Cat in the Hat, Green Eggs and Ham, Yertle the Turtle out loud. Although among the wonderful bonuses of grandparenting is that you can get them out and start all over again. Oh, The Places You'll Go is a book for graduates or for anyone about to move into a new future. I found in it, a word for those people peering through the mist of the river into the Promised Land, and a word to this congregation of God's people as you prepare individually to launch into a new future.

> "Congratulations!
> Today is your day.
> You're of to Great Places!
> You're off and away!
> You have brains in your head
> You have feet in your shoes
> You can steer yourself
> any direction you choose.
> You're on your own.
> And you know what you know.
> And you are the guy who'll decide
> where to go."

There are some risks. Dr. Seuss warns that the going will not always be smooth or easy.

"I'm sorry to say so
but sadly, it's true
that Bang-ups
and Hang-ups
can happen to you.

"You will come to a place where
the streets are not marked.
Some windows are lighted.
But mostly they're dark.
A place you could sprain
both your elbow and chin.
Do you dare stay out?
Do you dare go in?"

A friend of mine describes his ending up in ministry as "God, pulling him across 1,000 miles of prairie, his heels dug in, plowing up a pair of furrows from Colorado right up to the front door of McCormick Theological Seminary."

Sometimes it seems that the opposite of faith in the Bible is not sin or heresy, but the refusal to get up and move. Dr. Seuss put it this way:

"You can get so confused
that you'll start in to race
toward a most useless place –
the Waiting Place
for people just waiting
for a train to go,
or a bus to come,
or a plane to go,
or the mail to come,
or the rain to go,
or the phone to ring,
or the snow to snow,
or waiting for their hair to grow."

The sociologists teach us that in a time of rapid social change, when everything is moving and a time like this one, nothing is pinned down, you and I are inclined to create for ourselves "personal security zones," areas of life that are stable, unchanging, often nostalgically based on the past. And one of the most popular "personal stability zones," I submit, is religion.

Faith in the Bible is described as a journey, a moving from here to there, but we want stability. "Give me that old time religion." "If it was good enough for Moses, it's good enough for me." We don't want to follow Jesus into a new future. We want him to come to us and walk in a garden where the dew is on the roses and he can tell us that we are his and he is ours alone.

Martin Marty, in a now famous quip, once said that the seven last words of the institutional church will be, "We never did it that way before."

Lyle Schaller, one of the very best thinkers about how churches live in this culture, asked recently, "What is the number one issue facing Christian organizations on the North American continent? Dwindling numbers? Money? Social justice? Leadership? Television? Sexuality?" After three decades of study, he wrote,

> "This observer places a one-sentence issue at the top of that list – the need to initiate and implement planned change from within."
> [Strategies for Change, p. 10]

It is a critical time for the churches in our culture, particularly those of us who call ourselves mainline or mainstream. We continue to decline in numbers and, more importantly, in presence in the cities and rural towns and villages. We prosper in urban cathedrical situations and vigorous and growing suburban neighborhoods. If we do not think anew, we will simply disappear before a generation or two from those places where we used to be strong, but because of massive change in population, in demographics, in economics, we are now fighting for survival. We need to learn how to be a church in a new way. The old model which served us well for several centuries doesn't work anymore. We – you – must be courageous and faithful enough to leave the security of the old parish-neighborhood model which depends on an expensive piece of real estate, and a building constructed to respond to realities which haven't been seen for a century.

It is a very critical time for the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), a time I believe God is calling us to think anew, to leave old securities. New ecumenical realities are trying to be born: in spite of our nervousness about COCU and Bishops, Lutheran – Presbyterian Accords are about to be approved. Maybe even to leave what, for all the world, feels like our institutional codependence on discussions of human sexuality which have been absorbing all of our corporate energy, intelligence and imagination and re-imagination for 20 years – to extricate ourselves from this place we have been encamped since 1978, to cross the river, to include all the women and men God calls to leadership and get on with being a faithful church of Jesus Christ in a new century.

One day at the beginning of the story, he was walking beside the Sea of Galilee. He saw two men casting their net. Their names were Simon and Andrew. He said to them, "Follow me." And that is what they did … laid down their nets and followed. He saw two more, James and John, mending their gear, with their father sitting in their fishing boat. He said, "Follow me." And that is what they did.

We wish there were more to it than that. We wish we knew about them and their lives and what made them so ready to move, so willing to accept the risks and uncertainties and insecurities implied in walking away from job and family and tradition, into an unknown future. We wish we knew that they knew him and had reason for confidence in him, knew where he was leading them. But we don't. The account startles me every time I read it with its leanness: invitation – command – response. And I have concluded that this is what the Bible wants to say and that this

is a word from the Lord to me and to the church and to all of God's people – to all of us and each of us. To live your life faithfully begins with a summons to follow, and continues in a life which is moving always more deeply into the life of the world, a journey that can end up at the cross; a pilgrimage characterized by living for others, by loving the world for Christ's sake, by giving one's resources, skills, passion, love and life itself – to the cause of Christ.

Jesus called his disciples to get up from what they were doing and to follow him. He promised them new life. He said they would actually find their lives when they got up from what they were doing and moved into a new future, characterized by giving life away.

That is our secret. The promise is adventure, surprise, challenge, and through it all – life.

> "Out there things can happen
> and frequently do
> to people as brainy
> and footsy as you." Dr. Seuss advises.
> "And when things start to happen,
> don't worry. Don't stew.
> Just go right along.
> You'll start happening too!"

Oh, the places you will go! Like Dr. Seuss, the British poet, W. H. Auden, thought about the journey and at the end of his "Christmas Oratorio," wrote what I think are among the most hauntingly beautiful lines …

> "He is the way.
> Follow Him through the Land of Unlikeness
> You will see rare beasts,
> and have unique adventures.
>
> "He is the truth.
> Seek him in the kingdom of anxiety,
> You will come to a great city
> that has expected your return for years.
>
> "He is the life.
> Love Him in the world of the flesh.
> And at your marriage all its
> occasions shall dance with joy."

Jesus said, "Come: Follow me." Women and men of the graduating class of McCormick Theological Seminary,

> "Prepare your provisions, for in three days you are to cross over the Jordan, to go in to take possession of the land that the Lord your God gives you to possess."

[Joshua 1:11]

Go in peace and courage. Go in "departing happiness." Go in full confidence that the one who called you and brought you this far, will be out ahead of you, and will provide for you and will bless you on your way.

Thanks be to God.